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AUTHOR	Williams, Ty; Myers, Susan D.
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ABSTRACT

Storytelling has long been recognized as a valuable tool in elementary instruction. Storytelling strategies improve concept integration, and also provide children with experiences of working collaboratively. Through a combined effort between faculty and a doctoral student, a workshop was implemented to introduce the topic of storytelling to preservice teachers enrolled in a language arts methods course. The purpose of the workshop was to provide students an opportunity to explore and practice storytelling strategies that could be implemented in a language arts curriculum. The preservice teachers' responses indicated this innovative method could help bridge the gap between theory and real world applications for children. Contains 10 references. A 12-item list of storytelling web sites is attached. (Author/RS)

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Helping Preservice Teachers Discover the Value of Storytelling Strategies in Language Arts Instruction

Ty Williams, Ed. Sp.

The University of West Florida -doctoral candidate

Pensacola, FL

Susan D. Myers, Ed.D.

Assistant Professor of Education

Texas A&M University- Kingsville

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S D. Myers

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Abstract

Storytelling has long been recognized as a valuable tool in elementary instruction (Rooks, 1998). Storytelling strategies improve concept integration, and also provide children with experiences of working collaboratively.

Through a combined effort between faculty and a doctoral student, a workshop was implemented to introduce the topic of storytelling to preservice teachers enrolled in a language arts methods course. The purpose of the workshop was to provide students an opportunity to explore and practice storytelling strategies that could be implemented in a language arts curriculum. The preservice teachers' responses indicated this innovative method could help bridge the gap between theory and real world applications for children.

Helping Preservice Teachers Discover the Value of Storytelling Strategies in Language Arts Instruction

Introduction

Storytelling has long been recognized as a valuable tool in elementary instruction. Its use as a method to enhance students' conceptual development has been identified as significant (Rooks, 1998). Children benefit from storytelling strategies that improve concept integration, and also from the experience of working collaboratively. Additionally, practicing skills learned from storytelling have been proven effective to encourage writing development in students (Dwyer & Bain, 1999).

Storytelling as a teaching tool is certainly not a new concept. Storytelling has been recorded since early history as a vehicle to assist cultures in passing on heritage and other important societal traditions (Abrahamson, 1998). Moreover, storytelling enhances student imagination and expands language abilities. It assists children in the internalization of the characterization and interpretation of the stories being presented (Morrow, 1985). Many cultures possess their own version and forms of storytelling. As a result, storytelling can be used as a method to inject multicultural education into some aspects of the curriculum (Schor, Sims & Dennehy, 1996).

In language arts texts and journals articles, storytelling is referred to as a vehicle for imparting a story or information through verbal dialogue (Tompkins, 1998). This technique is presented as a strategy to improve comprehension and to develop sequencing skills in children of all ages. As an instructional tool, this strategy can assist in developing sequencing skills, plot development and other oracy components to literacy development (Hedrick & Pearich, 1999).

Storytelling Strategies for Preservice Teachers

One basic precept of storytelling is the supposition that in order to personalize a story one must be able to develop the storyline in his or her own words. As a result, listeners should then be able to visualize the story for themselves rather than observing the storyteller acting each part, including long-winded explanations of character or plot.

Storytelling concepts and application can be valuable tools for preservice teachers. Classroom instruction for elementary methods courses should include more than lecture and discussion of relevant course concepts. It also should include practical application for future teachers to develop their understanding of the subject and develop reflective strategies for curriculum planning (Rabinowitz, 1996). This bridging of the theory/application gap is sometimes viewed as problematic in traditional higher education settings (Abrahamson, 1998).

Teacher education divisions of institutions of higher education strive to provide preservice teachers with both a knowledge base and an experiential component in order to develop exemplary teaching practices (Travis, 1996). College faculty members have found it necessary to provide alternative methods of instruction to meet the needs of a diverse student population. No longer are traditional "stand and deliver" presentations perceived as adequate in the preparation of preservice teachers for classroom application (Travis, 1996). One strategy to help bridge this gap is the inclusion of practical application of course content. Providing preservice teachers an opportunity to experience and practice storytelling is one way this practical application of theory can be addressed.

Storytelling Workshop

A professional collaborative was initiated between colleagues at the University of West Florida. Our primary purpose was to explore the attitudes and knowledge of elementary preservice teachers concerning storytelling as a viable component of the language arts curriculum.

Discussions of storytelling as a tool for language development combined with an opportunity to practice these skills encouraged us to devise a method to present this teaching strategy to our preservice teachers.

Teacher education students had been introduced to the concept of storytelling from readings in the text. However, we also wanted to involve them in the actual process through an experiential approach. A workshop-style lesson was designed to explore the perceptions of preservice teachers concerning their personal creativity and their ability to utilize storytelling as a vehicle for language arts instruction. We also were interested to discover if participation in the workshop increased the students' perceived value of storytelling as a component of language arts instruction.

Two informal instruments were devised to collect data on student perceptions of their own level of creativity and their understanding of storytelling. An additional open-ended survey was developed to informally document the reflections of the preservice teachers about the workshop and storytelling practices in general. This response document contained three open-ended statements and was completed by the participants at the end of the workshop. The primary focus of the reflective exercise involved the impressions of the students concerning the storytelling exercise and how this type of activity could be used in elementary instruction.

The ninety-minute workshop was presented to undergraduate teacher education students enrolled in a three-semester hour language arts elementary methods course at. Storytelling as a theory and strategy was introduced in phases, permitting students several opportunities to explore and experience the various components. One focus of the workshop included an opportunity for students to observe and participate in their own versions of storytelling.

"Instant Storytelling"

The workshop was presented in the campus auditorium allowing us access to a stage and providing us plenty of room for the students to spread out and collaborate in small groups. The change of locale from the usual classroom setting to the auditorium was also to help create a different learning atmosphere for the students. A brief introduction, a discussion of storytelling, small group work and a concluding activity using the questionnaire and reflective response papers comprised the four components of the workshop. To facilitate a storytelling activity later in the lesson, students were instructed to select a prop as they arrived to the auditorium.

The workshop opened with a brief lecture on aspects of personal creativity in storytelling activities. The format for "instant storytelling" was then presented and demonstrated. The workshop presenter, a graduate student, and I proceeded to demonstrate an example of instant storytelling for the participants. A story example was presented to the audience by developing a story within a limited time span. Each story presenter was given a strip of paper with a short phrase written on it. The content written on the strip of paper was revealed only to the story presenter. Using a timer, a maximum of three minutes was allowed for each speaker to present a portion of his or her improvised story. One person began the story and when the timer rang, the next person continued and expanded the narrative, including components from the first portion of the story. The expectation was that each storyteller would weave portions of the story from the previous storyteller into his or her own presentation. The final person in the exercise was to complete the story using information from the other two participants and provide a conclusion.

Following the demonstration, the group analyzed the demonstration they had observed. The debriefing included a discussion of sequencing, plot, and descriptive narrative by the storytellers. Discussion also focused on creativity and spontaneity. Students discussed how stories

could be developed spontaneously with children and with limited additional materials. The demonstration also showed how you could employ storytelling as a cooperative activity. Through students working collaboratively to develop stories, creativity could be encouraged. Children could rely on others in the group to develop and expand a storyline.

Following the discussion, workshop participants were randomly divided into groups and asked to develop a story, using the selected props and the demonstrated technique. The groups had approximately fifteen minutes to collaborate and develop their stories. Afterwards, students presented their stories, which were followed by a debriefing of the process. As a concluding exercise, the students were asked to respond to the questionnaire and reflective response open-ended survey.

Student Response

Written responses from the audience explored perceptions of students about the workshop and its viability in a language arts program. Students commented they now saw the possibilities of including storytelling activities in their classroom instruction. Participants indicated they benefited from viewing the demonstration of instant storytelling. The provision of a format for developing stories in an instructional setting gave students some structure if they chose to incorporate this strategy in future lessons. Examples of comments from the workshop included:

> *I was really impressed with this lesson. It was a new and rewarding way to be creative and learn.*

When asked the question, "What can you use in from this experience in teaching a lesson?" student comments included:

> *Everything- it could be used as a culminating activity after teaching students about plot, theme and characterization.*

Other students responded to this question with examples of ways of using this technique and the benefits of using storytelling with diverse populations of children and in collaborative groups. Their comments included:

> *In my future classroom I will use this storytelling method to promote creativity in my students. This lesson also promotes teamwork and collaboration.*

Overall, students appeared to perceive storytelling as a viable option for instruction. Through the experiences provided in the workshop, participants felt they possessed enough personal creativity to introduce and facilitate a similar lesson with children.

Conclusion

As preservice teachers prepare to develop language arts lessons, they explore many strategies. Providing these students an opportunity to examine and participate in the storytelling experience expanded their repertoire of possible strategies for future classroom use. These students were able to observe how storytelling could be implemented with few materials and as a collaborative activity to enhance and develop creativity in children.

Further study and exploration of the use of storytelling with preservice teachers could provide additional insights into the effectiveness of this method. A follow up survey of workshop participants during their student teaching or practicum assignment would provide information concerning the implementation of this strategy. From an instructor's perspective, it might be valuable for participants to design a language arts lesson that included a storytelling focus. This extension activity would help strengthen the theory/practice connection, as well as provide additional practice for students in incorporating storytelling into classroom lessons.

The use of storytelling as a strategy with diverse learners would also be of interest to practicing teachers (Hedrick & Pearich, 1999). Employing storytelling strategies is shown to

develop oracy, and also as a vehicle to improve students' written language skills (Rook, 1998). As multimedia tools are increasingly incorporated into classrooms, the use of storytelling in a language arts curriculum may provide alternatives to teachers as they attempt to address the needs of learners. Examples of using the Internet as an on-going storytelling tool for both undergraduate students and classroom use has been documented to be an effective tool for instruction (Abrahamson, 1998). Storytelling sites could provide a valuable tool in developing a deeper understanding of the uses of this strategy (Appendix B). Higher education teaching practices can also learn from the lessons of effective storytelling by developing conceptual activities for student reflection and processing theoretical information (Travis, 1998).

Teacher education can provide many opportunities for preservice teachers to learn best teaching practices through participatory activities. Workshop participants commented on the value of storytelling as a technique for promoting conceptual understanding in language arts. It helped the participants to maintain interest in subject material and develop future collaborative skills for elementary children. Preservice teachers were able to determine that storytelling was a viable component for language arts instruction. Students experienced an opportunity to observe storytelling techniques through demonstrations of instant storytelling and the development of their own stories.

> *"Everyone is a storyteller, and given some nurturing can become a better one... Once set loose the storytelling impulse enables the most unlikely people to deploy unsuspected linguistic resources and strategies." (Rosen, 1998,p. 167)*

Participants in this workshop observed how stories could be developed spontaneously with simple planning and organization. Creativity for both students and teachers was enhanced and developed using this ancient form of language.

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Storytelling Web Sites

KidZone-Afro-American: http://www.afroam.org/children/children.html

Cyberkids Launchpad: http://www.cyberkids.com/lp/index.html

Information Please Kids Almanac: http://www.kids.infoplease.com/

Kidsworld: http://www.bconnex.net/~kidworld/

Poetry tiles: http://www.geocities.com/EnchantedForest/5165/tiles.html

Weka Writers Workshop:
http://weka.unitecnology.ac.nz/writers/workshop/home.html

Hasidic Stories from Torah: http://www.613.org/hasid.html

Animals, Myths, & Legends: http://www.ozemail.com.au/~oban/

"Believe in Your Dreams": http://www.webtimestories.com/ya/dream.html

Read-along Stories: http://www.indiana.edu/~eric_rec/fl/pcto/read.html

Rebel Cows: A Victim's Story:
http://www.indiana.edu/~eric_rec/fl/c16tx2.html

Tales of Wonder: http://members.xoom.com/darsie/tales/index.html